

SHAKESPEAREAN EVOLUTION IN BENGAL: READING OTT ADAPTATION OF MACBETH AS MANDAAR THROUGH DERRIDEAN *FREEPLAY* OF POWER

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Abstract: The historical practice of adaptation reflects the interplay between tradition and innovation, involving the reinterpretation of stories and legends across diverse cultures, as commonly seen in the classical world among playwrights, poets, and storytellers. The Renaissance period saw a resurgence of interest in classical literature and a flourishing of dramatic adaptations. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a proliferation of literary adaptations across various forms of media, including novels, plays, and films. Classic literary works were adapted and reinterpreted to suit the changing cultural and artistic landscapes of the time. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed the proliferation in cinematic production. Shakespeare penetrated the arena of Bollywood to a large extent. The 21st century presented before us a new media orientation in the form of TV series. This gives liberty to the filmmakers in terms of length and censorship.

This paper focuses on how the Bengali web series *Mandaar*, created by Anirban Bhattacharya and Pratik Dutta, which eventually became the first web series in India to adapt Shakespeare, renovated itself from the actual production of *Macbeth*. This paper offers a Derridean analysis of the web series, exploring the complex themes of power, ambition, and gender dynamics. Through the lens of *Freeplay*, the paper delves into the interplay of prophecies, the subversion of traditional gender roles, and the psychological and moral unraveling of characters. The series is deconstructed to reveal the fluid and shifting nature of power dynamics, highlighting the contingent nature of authority. The paper also examines the structural elements of the series, which mirror the dramatic arc of traditional storytelling, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the plot's evolution. Ultimately, this analysis sheds light on the complexities of identity and representation in contemporary media.

Keywords: Mandaar, Shakespearean Adaptation, Freeplay, Indian Cinema, Web Series

Throughout history, adaptation has been a dynamic and evolving practice, reflecting the interplay between tradition and innovation, cultural exchange, and the enduring power of storytelling. The practice of adaptation can be traced back to ancient mythology and oral tradition, where stories and legends were passed down through generations, often undergoing changes and reinterpretations as they were retold by different cultures and

communities. In the classical world, the adaptation of myths, legends, and historical events was a common practice among playwrights, poets, and storytellers. Writers such as Ovid and Homer adapted existing myths and legends into their works, reinterpreting and reimagining traditional narratives. The modern critic T.S. Eliot opines that the act of adapting existing works involves a dialogue with tradition. When artists adapt or appropriate existing texts, they engage with a broader cultural and artistic tradition, drawing on the collective heritage of storytelling, myth, and literature. This process of adaptation, according to Eliot's framework, is not simply a replication of the past, but a creative act that contributes to the ongoing evolution of tradition (Eliot). However, the Renaissance period saw a resurgence of interest in classical literature and a flourishing of dramatic adaptations. Playwrights like William Shakespeare engaged in the adaptation and appropriation of myth, folklore, and historical chronicles, reworking existing stories and characters into new dramatic contexts. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a proliferation of literary adaptations across various forms of media, including novels, plays, and films. Classic literary works were adapted and reinterpreted to suit the changing cultural and artistic landscapes of the time. In the late 20th century, the concept of adaptation became intertwined with postmodernism and intertextuality (Sanders 21). Artists and writers began to engage with existing texts in a self-referential and critical manner, creating new works that reflected the act of adaptation itself. In the contemporary era, adaptation has expanded to encompass a wide range of media, including television, web series, video games, and digital platforms. The practice of adaptation continues to evolve, with creators drawing inspiration from diverse cultural sources and engaging in cross-cultural and cross-media adaptations.

The works of Shakespeare, in particular, have been adapted in various ways throughout history. From the early modern period to the present day, Shakespeare's plays have been reinterpreted to reflect the cultural, social, and political realities of different times and places. During the Restoration period in England, for example, playwrights such as Nahum Tate and William Davenant altered plotlines, added scenes and characters, and set aspects to music. In the 19th century, Shakespeare's plays were adapted for the Victorian stage, with productions emphasizing spectacle and sentimentality. In the 20th century, Shakespearean adaptations became more experimental and diverse. In a report released by Guinness World Records in 2016, it was documented that William Shakespeare holds the record for being the most filmed author of all time, with a remarkable 1,121 writing credits in film and television productions ("Most Filmed

Author”). Filmmakers and playwrights began to transpose the stories to different settings and genres, exploring new themes and ideas. For example, Akira Kurosawa's “Throne of Blood” (1957) transposes “Macbeth” to feudal Japan, while Baz Luhrmann's “Romeo + Juliet” (1996) sets the story in a contemporary American city.

In recent years, Shakespearean adaptations have become increasingly global, with filmmakers and playwrights from around the world reimagining the plays in their own cultural contexts. The nations of the third world also interpreted and adapted Shakespeare according to their domesticity. One prominent reason behind this is of course Colonialism. And this “colonial domination” leads to “cultural domination” (Yadav 48). However, in India, for example, filmmakers have created innovative adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. But prior to the arrival of the filmmakers, Shakespeare, in India, had been carried out by theatrical practitioners. Mention must be made of the Parsi theatre tradition, which emerged in the 19th century. It played a crucial role in popularizing Shakespeare's plays among Indian audiences. Parsi theatre companies staged adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, often incorporating local languages, music, and performance styles to make the works more accessible and entertaining for Indian audiences (Dionne and Kapadia 21–38).

In terms of films, the earliest Indian cinematic engagement with Shakespeare dates back to the silent era, with films like *Dil Farosh* (1927), based on *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Khoon-e-Nahak* (1928) and *Mitha Zahar* (1930), which were adaptations of *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline*. These early adaptations borrowed freely from Shakespeare's works, changing and interpolating without qualms and usually without acknowledgements. In the 1940s and 50s, there were attempts to bring a more authentic Shakespeare to the screen, as seen in Kishore Sahu's *Hamlet* (1954). However, these attempts were not commercially successful, and it was not until the contemporary era that Shakespearean adaptations gained popularity in Indian cinema. The contemporary Indian film industry namely Bollywood, has seen a dynamic incorporation of Shakespearean elements. “Bollywood can be said to be bluntly Shakespeare-esque in its temperament featuring song and dance, love triangles, comedy, melodrama, star-crossed lovers, angry parents, conniving villains, convenient coincidences and mistaken identities” (Yadav 49). Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* and *Omkara* are modern adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, respectively, which transpose the stories to the criminal underworld of Mumbai (Trivedi 2-11). These adaptations capture the dynamic interaction between Shakespeare's universal themes and India's unique cultural, historical, and political setting. They also show how Shakespeare's stories continue to connect and inspire unique reinterpretations in many cultural contexts.

Shakespearean remnants may be discovered in a variety of modalities in Indian film, such as transient images, passages of conversation, scene and sequence fragments, citations or quotes, characterisation, and themes. These remnants demonstrate that Shakespeare is no longer the outsider, but rather an integral part of the national cultural imaginary. The recurring appearance of Shakespearean traces in Indian cinema demonstrates the lasting impact of his works on the Indian film industry. Shakespeare's ideas and characters continue to appeal with Indian viewers, and his works give a wealth of inspiration for filmmakers.

Now, much as the Parsi theatre evolved to propagate Shakespeare's works in Hindi film, the Bengali cinematic version of Shakespeare has its roots in the Bengali theatre. "Shakespeare came to Bengal, and more specifically to its capital Calcutta, in the eighteenth century" (Chaudhuri 32). According to the records, the first Shakespeare performance was *Othello* in 1780 at the Calcutta Theatre to commemorate the retirement of the manager, who also portrayed the title character. But most significantly, the foundation of the Hindu College in 1817 and the teaching of Shakespeare by eminent educators like Richardson played a pivotal role in introducing Shakespeare to Bengali students. "(T)hough the theatre is very old in India, the modern theatre in Bengal is largely a gift from England—in particular, Shakespeare's" (Bhattacharyya 27). This exposure instilled a literary appetite for theatre in kids, teaching them not only to appreciate Shakespeare analytically, but also to recite and perform parts from his plays. Shakespeare's impact on the nascent Bengali theatre culture began with early staging of his plays by Bengali students in the nineteenth century. Almost all great Bengali playwrights from Madhusudan to D. L. Roy had Shakespeare before them as the ideal and were well acquainted with his plays. The Bangiya Shakespeare Parishad, led by distinguished Shakespearean scholars, was committed to translating Shakespeare's works faithfully and producing those translations on stage. Notable translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Macbeth* translated by Nirendra Nath Roy, and translations of *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Othello* by Sunil Chatterjee, demonstrate how Shakespeare's works were actively integrated into the Bengali theatrical repertoire. Shakespeare's influence went beyond mere productions of his translated and adapted plays on the Bengali stage. Playwrights and critics in Bengal drew inspiration from Shakespeare, learning from him the concept of tragedy, the art of characterisation, and the orchestration of characters (Bhattacharyya 31-34).

The demise of Bengali theatre paved the way for the emergence of the cinema industry, resulting in a profound shift in Bengal's cultural and creative environment. Several causes contributed to Bengali theatre's demise, including shifting entertainment dynamics, the introduction of talkies, and the end of silent cinema. The film business opened up new avenues for artistic expression and amusement, resulting in the adaptation of literary classics such as Shakespeare's writings into cinematic productions. The success of the film business in attracting the attention of the audience, along with the fall of theatre culture, resulted in the emergence of Bengali cinema, which has since become the main form of entertainment in Bengal. The transition from stage to screen constituted an important turning point in Bengal's cultural and artistic landscape, demonstrating Shakespeare's and other literary masterpieces' long-lasting influence on the Bengali film industry. Bengali film began adapting Shakespeare in 1961 with *Saptapadi* which was based on *Othello* and was directed by Ajoy Kar. Then came *Bhranti Bilas* in 1963 by director Manu Sen Based on *The Comedy of Errors*, *Srimati Bhayankari* in 2001 directed by Anjan Banerjee based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hridmajhare* in 2014 directed by Ranjan Ghosh based on *Othello*, *Arshinagar* in 2015 directed by Aparna Sen based on *Romeo and Juliet*. In 2016 two movie productions came, the first one being *Hemanta* by Anjan Dutt in August 2016 based on *Hamlet*, and the other being *Zulfiqar* by Srijit Mukherjee in October 2016 based on *Julius Caesar* (Chakrabarty).

By the end of the decade 2010, a significant change was witnessed in the world of cinema and entertainment i.e., the growth of the OTT platforms, and the Web Series. The transition from a cinema-centric focus to an emphasis on web series is driven by shifting consumer behaviour, the diversification of content, and the disruptive influence of streaming platforms. In 2020, during the Global Pandemic, audience demand, production spending, and TV budgets hit all-time highs. As the demand for streaming services grows, more significant streaming platforms emerge ("An Industry Transformed: Four Emerging Trends in Film and TV"). This shift reflects the evolving preferences of audiences in the digital age, as well as the creative freedom and global reach offered by web series. The rise of subscription-based models and the flexibility of episodic storytelling have contributed to the growing prominence of web series as a platform for diverse and innovative content creation.

The web series *Mandaar* directed by Anirban Bhattacharya presents a narrative that intricately weaves themes of power, ambition, and gender dynamics, echoing the timeless motifs found in Shakespearean tragedy. Through the character of Mandaar, the